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## GRAMMAR, HOW MUCH AND HOW, IN ELEMENTARY YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL

(A paper presented in the Spanish Round Table Conference of the Modern Language Section, Pittsburgh meeting of N. E. A., July, 1918.)

The towering structures in our great cities are possible because of the great advance attained in recent years in the art of laying foundations and building framework. There was a limit too soon reached when ponderous skeletons of wood were the mainstay of architects. Moreover, walls were broken and floor space filled with heavy posts and braces. It almost seemed that such a building was constructed chiefly for the sake of its clumsy frame. Very striking is the contrast presented by the modern steel frame, slender, hidden, but immensely powerful. It has made possible structures of almost unlimited size and height. The skeleton has lost in bulk and gained in strength and usefulness.

The so-called grammar method of teaching foreign languages, whereby forms, rules and exceptions were memorized *en masse* and texts served as the basis for training in scientific analysis, undeniably possesses valuable features. The analytical attitude that sooner or later must be acquired by every one who is to use his own tongue with conscious accuracy is directly fostered. It should be recognized, however, that training, not practical achievement, is the aim of this method. The attention is here concentrated on the framework of language, not on language itself, and the framework is too bulky for the erection of the kind of linguistic structure that is demanded of teachers of Spanish.

For the first time in the history of this country there is beginning to arise a wide-spread demand for a *practical* knowledge of foreign languages. We have become a nation among the nations, and can no longer treat the foreign idiom as a mere field for mental gymnastics. The converging interests of the Americas make Spanish by all odds the most important language from a practical standpoint for North Americans to learn. Teachers of Spanish must meet the demands of this new practical standpoint. Nothing less than real attainment, leading to a permanent acquisition, will satisfy. In so far as grammar is concerned, this means at the outset limitation of bulk and hardening of fiber.

There is no special virtue in the limitation of grammatical knowledge as such. The amount of grammar we should teach in a given period of time is doubtless all we possibly can. Grammar in one form or another must be the chief concern throughout the high school course. It is a question of the formation of new habits of speech, many of them quite at variance with those already formed. The drillmaster will tell you of the weeks of concentrated effort that it takes to form in the recruit correct habits of posture and locomotion, yet these are simple matters compared with the complicated habits that must be ingrained in connection with the learning of a foreign language like Spanish. To understand and "see through" grammar is not particularly difficult. If this were all that is expected of us as teachers, there would be little need for the limitation of the amount of grammar. The high school boy can very quickly be made to *understand* that *blanco* does not belong with *casa*, but if the instruction goes no further than that, the chances of his *using* that particular combination rather than the correct one are very good indeed. Grammatical knowledge is sufficient if we are aiming at training in scientific method only, but if we aim to acquire Spanish as a tool by which we may broaden our sympathies, enrich our minds and fatten our purses, then we must possess, in addition to knowledge of grammar, above all, grammatical habits. Both are essential. The one must exist to test and maintain the other.

It is of course with an eye to the habit-forming aspect of instruction in grammar that the answer must be sought to the question: How much grammar is to be taught in the elementary year of the high school? Habits are not formed rapidly nor easily. Time and repetition are the factors in their formation. Most of the work that has a direct bearing on the matter of habit-formation must be done in the classroom. The burden falls of necessity upon the teacher, and this is just the point that teachers brought up under the grammar method fail to appreciate. The pupil must indeed work hard outside and extra classroom activity of the right sort must be exacted regularly, but from the habit-forming standpoint the recitation is of supreme importance.

Now the number of grammatical habits in a foreign language that can be acquired by the average class in the first year of its work in the language is decidedly limited. In general it is certainly safe

to say that it represents the minimum to which anything like a systematic survey of the grammar can be reduced. Success will depend very largely upon the skill of the teacher in making omissions.

High school pupils have reached the age where an orderly and progressive presentation of grammar is imperative. The setting up of the grammatical framework must be a conscious process. Anything less is unworthy of being done in the name of education. It is fair to demand that pupils at the end of their elementary year of instruction in Spanish shall be able to pass the right kind of an examination in pure grammar. This ability is, however, incidental and a matter of course, but if it is to be acquired, the points must be taken up logically and one at a time. The pupils must attain both a knowledge of and a "feeling for" the new speech forms. In the end they are to see clearly the forms, grouped systematically according to their various categories, and at the same time possess the kind of command over these forms that leads to correct and ready expression.

The problems that arise in connection with the actual teaching of grammar in the elementary year are many and perplexing. Perhaps no two people can ever exactly agree as to the solution of them. One of the most vital of these problems concerns the question what to omit. It is undoubtedly practicable and probably advisable to omit treatment of the subjunctive almost entirely. It may very well be limited to a few of the simplest uses of the present tense. Then, too, the number of irregular verbs taught can be strictly limited. In general, questions of form and syntax may be treated in their more regular aspects only.

The order in which the various topics shall be treated is also important. Shall we throw the emphasis on the articles, nouns and adjectives at the outset, as is done in many beginners' books, or shall we plunge at once into the verb? It seems that there are several reasons why the latter may be the better course. Most of the real difficulties for the pupil attempting Spanish for the first time are found in connection with the verb. Verb drill will, therefore, command the major share of attention throughout the elementary year, and for some time after that. Moreover, the verb is essential in drill for living grammar, no matter what the topic to be emphasized. The simplicity of nouns and adjectives as compared

with verbs in Spanish makes it possible to use the former much more readily at the outset than the latter. The present tense of regular verbs is perhaps the logical starting-point in teaching Spanish grammar.

Shall we follow up this introduction immediately with more of the verb, or shall we throw the emphasis for the next few lessons upon other parts of speech, or shall we mix the two? The latter seems to be the popular way, but there are reasons in favor of a different procedure. More time is needed for the thorough mastery of the present tense than for any other. It has to break the ground, so to speak, and, properly mastered, it paves the way for the other tenses. In learning the present, certain phases of the verb problem are solved once for all. It is well therefore to allow plenty of time for the present to "soak in." Furthermore, to go ahead with the verb, without due attention to the other parts of speech, results in lack of balance and imposes undesirable limitations. The solution of the problem is possibly to let the present tense stand till articles, nouns, etc., have received their due share of attention. This allows plenty of time for the present tense to become thoroughly fixed, and permits greater freedom in drill exercises when the verb is again taken up. This scheme does not sacrifice to any appreciable extent the advantages to be gained from continuity of emphasis on a given topic. The truce in the battle with verbs need not be excessively long. Topics which require extended drill, such as the personal pronoun, may well await treatment later.

The question, What to begin with? is naturally followed by the question, How to begin? Right at the outset attention must, of course, be concentrated upon pronunciation, and in this work it is best to proceed with books closed. By the time the class is ready to use books, the names of objects in and about the classroom should already be familiar. The first lesson in the book will deal with the same material, but the drill is directed entirely toward the present tense of regular verbs. That is the goal to be attained in this first lesson and everything else is incidental. The drill will be of the rapid-fire question and answer type, and may be both written and oral. At the end of the lesson come the paradigms of the present tense of the three regular verb classes, together with the necessary explanations in English. The memorization of these paradigms comes only after the individual forms have become known and can

be used. The memorization of these paradigms is by no means superfluous. It helps to make the pupil conscious of the value of speech forms and builds up a storehouse of forms which are dispensable only when the foreign language shall have become almost a second mother tongue.

The procedure with the present tense is typical. The essential thing is that the drill be concentrated on one point at a time and held there till that point is mastered. Whatever value aimless conversation may have in later stages, it is certainly a waste of precious time in the elementary year. Oral drill, effective and logical though it be in language instruction, is very prone to lose its value almost entirely if the teacher be not continually on the alert and energetic enough to plan his work in advance.

Grammar, then, in one form or another is the main task of the elementary year. It is the framework of language. This framework must be strong but should not for that reason be bulky. The amount of grammar taught in the elementary year must be limited; not because a knowledge of grammar is undesirable nor because grammar is necessarily uninteresting to the pupil, but simply because the pupil must have time to form grammatical habits and habit-formation is a slow process. We must present grammar in an orderly and systematic manner, because beginners in high school are old enough to profit by such a presentation. Anything less results in confusion and discouragement on the part of the learner. He feels "all at sea" in grammar, as he often says. Finally, success or failure depends upon drill, concentrated upon one point at a time, and made as varied and compelling as the ingenuity of the teacher can devise. Let no man think that in teaching an elementary class in Spanish he has an easy task before him nor one unworthy of his best efforts in class and out. It is to be hoped that a point has been reached by modern-language teachers in this country where partisanship as regards methods may be laid aside. The tremendous responsibilities that rest upon teachers of Spanish in this country make it imperative that all problems be met with open minds and a readiness to seize upon all that is good no matter where found.

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